



NEW SCANDINAVIA LUTHERAN CHURCH SEPTEMBER NEWSLETTER 2025

When I was looking for a saint to learn about this month, I found a handful of names that jumped out to me; Henri Nouwen, one of my favorite spiritual writers; the Martyrs of Birmingham, four young girls killed when a bomb was thrown into their Alabama church in 1963; Mother Teresa of Calcutta. However, I kept going back to one as it kept piquing my interest. So, instead of me introducing you to the person at the beginning, I will give you my version of Paul Harvey's "The Rest of the Story". Enjoy.

In April of 1581, Vincent was born to a peasant family in Gascony (France). His early life was spent in a determined struggle to escape his humble roots. His family shared this ambition, hoping that a career in the priesthood would better the family fortune. Thus, as a boy, he was entrusted to the Franciscans and was eventually ordained at the remarkably young age of nineteen (the legal age to become a priest was 24). It appears that Vincent's early attitude toward his vocation was no less worldly than that of his parents. The priesthood was a way to escape the farm. Once, in seminary, he was visited by his father but was so ashamed of the old man's shabby peasant clothes that he refused to see him.

After his ordination, Vincent applied himself to securing a series of lucrative districts/jurisdictions. It was not long before he had risen to become a chaplain in the service of Queen Margaret of Valois (France). His charm and social skills gained him entry into the highest levels of society. Eventually he served as the family tutor and chaplain to one of the wealthiest families of Paris. Thus, he might have passed his life as one of the worldly and entitled clerics of pre-Revolutionary France, living off the lifetime benefits of the position and enjoying the stimulating table-talk of the social gathering places in Paris.

In mid-life, however, Vincent underwent a great transformation. The occasion was a summons to hear the dying confession of a peasant on the estate of a wealthy family. After he had received absolution, the man happened to remark that he might well have perished in a state of mortal sin had the priest not heard his confession. Vincent was struck as never before by the seriousness of his vocation. He determined that from now on his priesthood would be dedicated to service of the poor.

A number of concerns competed for his attention in the years that followed. Vincent was concerned about the spiritual impoverishment of the rural masses and about the poor formation of the clergy. He founded a mission congregation- a society of secular priests, later known as the Vincentians- devoted to the training of parish clergy and to the mission work in the countryside. At the same time, he utilized his extensive contacts in the court and high society to organize a wide range of charitable endeavors. He was particularly adept at attracting the services of aristocratic women. He convinced a number of them to wear gray habits and to undertake a personal ministry to the poor and destitute.

There were few charitable projects in which Vincent was not engaged. He founded hospitals and orphanages, as well as homes for the humane care of the mentally ill. He had a personal ministry to prisoners and galley slaves and also raised money for the ransom of Christian slaves held captive in North Africa. Already in his lifetime Vincent became something of a legend. The rich and powerful vied to donate to his projects, while the poor accepted him as one of their own. His spirituality was based on the encounter with Christ in the needs of one's poor neighbors. As he instructed to his priests and Sisters, "The poor are your masters, and you are their servants."

Love of the poor did not mean sentimental adoration to Vincent. He was scornful of those who liked to remain in the realm of imaginary acts of charity. Our love of God must be "effective," he wrote. "We must love God...But let it be in the work of our bodies, in the sweat of our brows. For very often many acts of love for God, of kindness, of good will, and other similar inclinations and interior practices of a tender heart, although good and very desirable, are yet very suspect when they do not lead to the practice of effective love."

Vincent's last years were spent in painful illness. In approaching the hour of his death his prayer was, "We have done what you commanded; do now what you have promised." Vincent died on September 27, 1660, at the age of seventy-nine. His canonization (given the title of saint) followed in 1737. Later, Pope Leo XIII named him patron of all charitable societies. This included the movement dedicated to his name, the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Therefore, in the words of Paul Harvey, "and now you know the rest of the story."

Pastor Sara